



Henry H. Straight--Educator

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Lloyd E. McCann, "Henry H. Straight—Educator," *Nebraska History* 35 (1954): 59-71

Article Summary: Straight, the president of Peru State Normal School, significantly influenced the content of science courses and methods of science teaching.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Henry H Straight, J M McKenzie, Johann Pestalozzi, Louis Agassiz, Emma Dickerman Straight

Place Names: Oberlin and Galena, Ohio; Peru, Nebraska

Institutions Where Straight Worked: Peru State Normal School, Nebraska; Oswego Normal School, New York; Warrensburg Normal School, Missouri; Cook County Normal School, Illinois

Keywords: Henry H Straight, Oberlin College, Peru State Normal School, project teaching

HENRY H. STRAIGHT—EDUCATOR

BY LLOYD E. McCANN

HENRY Harrison Straight, second president of Peru State Normal School, was among the earliest Nebraska educators to exert a continuing influence upon the character of American public education. The inclusion of science as a basic school subject, especially in the elementary grades, and the development of modern methods of instruction both result, in part, from the efforts of Henry Straight to improve the content and processes of formal education. Straight began his investigations in science teaching at Peru, and the prestige which he later gained as these activities proved to be successful helped also to establish an early reputation for the Nebraska institution.

Henry Straight was named president of Peru State Normal School (or "principal," as he was called) when the first executive of the school, Professor J. M. McKenzie, resigned to become state superintendent of Nebraska. Straight assumed the position as principal in January, 1871. The *Nebraska Advertiser* printed a report of the change of administrations:

As our readers are aware, Prof. McKenzie, by reason of his election as State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has resigned the position of Principal of the State Normal School at Peru, in this county. The Board of Directors have secured H. H. Straight, A. B., of Oberlin, Ohio, to fill the vacancy. We have not the

Dr. Lloyd E. McCann is co-ordinator of graduate study in education at Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana.

pleasure of an acquaintance with the professor, but feel well assured the Board has the best evidence of his fitness for the position.¹

When Henry H. Straight became principal of Peru Normal he was an unmarried educator of twenty-six. He was born in Charlotte Center, Chautauqua County, New York, July 20, 1846. He was orphaned while a young boy but did receive instruction in the common schools. When he was sixteen years old he taught a three month term of school for which he received a salary of thirty-nine dollars. This experience apparently included "boarding around" on which Straight commented that, "The snarlings, frettings, scoldings, and fightings of many families stand out so clear that he who runs may read. (We call to mind a few instances of how we both ran and read.)"²

The following three years, 1863-1866, were spent in school—first at the preparatory school and then at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. He was interested in languages and assisted in teaching classes in Latin and Greek in the preparatory school. At the end of his second year in Oberlin College (1866) he withdrew to take a position as principal of the public schools at Galena, Ohio. In this position he expected to earn enough money to finance further study in German universities, then the leading schools in the fields of science and philology.

While teaching at Galena, however, he gave a course of object lessons in science. The success of this course brought him to consider how science might assume a more important place in the educational program of the common schools. When the term was completed he returned to Oberlin to complete the work for the Bachelor of Arts degree. The degree was conferred in 1870, but he remained as a student of theology during the fall of 1870. He left Oberlin to become principal at Peru.

Peru Normal School, when Henry Straight arrived to become its second executive head, was a fledgling institution less than four years old, serving only a local area

¹*Nebraska Advertiser*, Brownville, Nov. 24, 1870.

²H. H. Straight, "A 'Complete Life' The Foundation of a True Philosophy of Education," *Nebraska Teacher*, March, 1873, p. 63.

and enjoying only a local reputation. The first public normal school in the United States had been founded in Massachusetts in 1839, but less than a dozen others had been established before the Civil War. One of the early institutions was the Normal School at Oswego, New York, founded in 1861. The success of this institution gave considerable impetus to the normal school movement, and Peru Normal was one of eleven normal schools established during the 1860's partly through this wave of enthusiasm.

The local efforts which led to the establishment of Peru Normal were not, initially at least, in conscious imitation of Oswego. The citizens of Peru who provided the funds and undertook the promotion of the school first planned to establish a college and seminary and then to present it to the Methodist Episcopal Church for administration and operation. When the Nebraska Methodist Conference declined the offer in 1866, these citizens turned to the Nebraska Legislature, hopeful that the state university might be located at Peru. This also was unsuccessful, but a legislative compromise provided for the location of a normal school, and Peru Normal enrolled its first students in 1867.

As head of the school, the trustees secured Professor J. M. McKenzie who had for several years operated a seminary (actually an academy) at Pawnee City. Professor McKenzie appears to have been a competent enough educator, but more than that he was a dynamic promoter. This was the kind of combination needed to make Peru Normal a success. McKenzie's zeal for the school and his ingenuity in meeting difficult circumstances helped the young institution gain some forward momentum.

The first students at the school were attracted quite as much by the opportunity to obtain the rudiments of an education as by the desire to teach. McKenzie writes of these early years:

The most arduous part of the teacher's work was the difficulty of training young people in the best methods of preparing their lessons. Many of the pupils had really no preparation for the subjects they were called upon to pursue. In fact, the fundamental branches such as reading, spelling, and arithmetic were merely

unknown quantities to many of them... Thus the work of the Normal School for the first few years of its existence was simply to prepare the pupils for the ordinary business of life."³

This level of preparation was characteristic of frontier colleges generally, and most of the early normal schools in other states faced similar demands. The early Massachusetts normals found that their first job was to teach the prospective teachers the content of the courses they were expected to teach.

The enrollment at Peru in the fall of 1867 was thirty-two normal school pupils and thirty-nine others. The total student enrollment had grown to approximately one hundred students by 1870 when Henry Straight replaced J. M. McKenzie as head of the institution.

When Straight reached Peru it was evident that the influence of Oswego on teacher education had already been felt at the western school. Among the textbooks in use were Page's *Theory and Practice*, and Norman L. Calkins' *Object Lessons*. Miss M. S. Osborne was conducting practice in "object teaching" in the Model Department.⁴

The term "object teaching" refers to the system of instruction popularized in this country by the Oswego Normal School which derived it from the methods developed by the Swiss educator, Johann Pestalozzi. The method placed much emphasis on the then current ideas of how children learn and especially on the use of concrete teaching materials in the classroom. Teachers were urged to use natural materials and methods rather than depend entirely upon textbooks.

Henry Straight had had both training in these teaching methods and a basic education in science unusual for

³J. M. McKenzie, "History of the Peru State Normal," *Nemaha County Republican*, Auburn, Nebraska, p. 23.

⁴"The spring term will open April 5th, under the direction of the same corps of teachers. The Normal Department is conducted by Prof. H. H. Straight, a graduate of Oberlin College. Particular attention will be given to Object Teaching, and members of the normal class will have practice in teaching throughout the term in the Model Department which is conducted by Miss M. S. Osborne, an experienced and competent teacher." (*Nebraska Advertiser*, Brownville, March 23, 1871.)

teachers of that period. These he combined in his work at Peru. His efforts appear to have produced dynamic classroom experiences for students, but they were not received without misgivings. McKenzie writes:

Prof. Straight was a young man of more than ordinary ability, a thorough student, ardent in his investigations in natural history. Not content with the statements found in books he gave himself to original research and not only verified the statements found in books, but discovered other important facts not there stated. His enthusiasm and new methods of presenting subjects put new life for a time into the school. It looked for a while that the students would rally to his support, though comparisons from the first were made. But unfortunately the new principal was found to be somewhat eccentric. While scholarship and ability to present subjects in a clear forceful manner are exceedingly important to a teacher, a principal has far more important duties to perform. Students not only need a stimulus in executing tasks imposed, but they especially need counsel in choosing and directing the work they expect to accomplish in life. Professor Straight was an enthusiast in his line of work and greatly magnified its importance in directing the life work of his students. . . . Character building is after all the important qualification and the eccentric educator usually fails in that line more than any other. He failed as a principal in part because of unfavorable conditions and in part because of a peculiar personality. The board was so well pleased with his ability as an instructor that he was retained in the school for a few years.⁵

It is difficult to assess this statement of McKenzie's accurately from fragmentary information reviewed eighty years after the events. McKenzie apparently felt that the charge of eccentricity needed some substantiation since he further relates:

While taking his meals at a certain lady's house, she asked him what he preferred for his drink. He answered he sometimes preferred water, sometimes milk, sometimes tea, and sometimes coffee; so, if it were not too much trouble to her, he would be glad to have each put near his plate at each meal. She complied with his request.⁶

It must be admitted that this anecdote sounds a little like the backyard gossip of a disgruntled landlady, but if

⁵J. M. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 45.

true this or similar stories might have detracted from the dignity and decorum expected from a college president during this period. On the other hand, David Starr Jordan (who met Straight two years later at Penikese Island) refers to "Prof. H. H. Straight and his bride... whom all of us loved and respected,"⁷ and resolutions of the Board of Trustees at Oswego Normal and Training School⁸ and of a class of students at Martha's Vineyard Summer Institute⁹ both testify to the high personal and professional opinions held of Professor Straight.

An interpretation of Straight's resignation more in keeping with these favorable opinions is contained in a sketch regarding Straight written by an unnamed contributor:

A growing conviction of the value of science in schemes of public education induced him to resign the position (as principal of Peru Normal) at the end of the year, although he had selected a corps of teachers for the next term, in order that he might take the more congenial situation of teacher of Natural Sciences and Psychology in the same school. Here he laid the foundation of all his future work, mapped out a scheme of education based upon science and the industries... and... stated the same beliefs and hopes that ever found expression in his later teaching.¹⁰

The *Minutes* of the State Normal Board for September 9, 1871, state cryptically:

Prof. H. H. Straight resigned his position as principal which was excepted (sic) and he was employed as teacher of Natural Science at a salary of one thousand pr year.¹¹

Henry Straight remained as science teacher at Peru for two years, 1871-1873. During the winter of 1873 he was invited to lecture at Central Missouri Normal School at Warrensburg. This lecture, "What We Want and How

⁷D. S. Jordan, *Science Sketches*, A. C. McClurg and Company, Chicago, 1896, p. 142.

⁸Board of Trustees of Oswego Normal and Training School, *Minutes*, July 5, 1883.

⁹Quoted in Oswego State Normal and Training School, *Historical Sketches Relating to the First Quarter Century*, R. J. Oliphant, Oswego, 1888, pp. 185-190.

¹⁰Oswego State Normal and Training School, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-190.

¹¹Nebraska State Normal Board, *Minutes*, September 9, 1871.

We Get It," was heard by only a small crowd in rather severe weather, but a local newspaper commented that it was good both in subject matter and in delivery.¹² In March, 1873, the *Nebraska Teacher* reprinted an article written by Straight for the *American Journal of Education*.¹³ In the discussion Straight stated the position that it is the duty of the school to promote the "Complete Life" of man. To do this, it is necessary that the educational system promote the physical well-being of man through the scientific study of man's proper relationship to the universe. Upon this basis it will be possible to improve moral, social, and religious teaching and help to perfect the "Complete Life."

Henry Straight ended his service at Peru in the spring of 1873 and was appointed to a teaching position in the Science Department of Central Missouri Normal School at Warrensburg. He went directly from Peru to Warrensburg to join Miss Emma Dickerman, a graduate of Oswego Normal School, who had directed the Model School at Peru during the school year 1871-1872. Straight and Miss Dickerman were married at Warrensburg in June, 1873.¹⁴

Meanwhile plans had been matured to create what was to become the first summer school in the United States, conducted in this case for naturalists and science teachers. This was the Anderson School of Natural History, conducted on Penikese Island off the coast of Massachusetts under the direction of the distinguished naturalist, Professor Louis Agassiz. Fifty students (thirty-five men and fifteen women) were chosen from a large number of applicants. They included Henry Straight and his bride; a "Miss Johonnot"—apparently the daughter of Professor James Johonnot then principal of Central Missouri Normal School at Warrensburg; and David Starr Jordan, naturalist and later president of Indiana University and of Leland Stanford University, as well as other well-known scientists.

¹²*Warrensburg Standard*, Warrensburg, Missouri, Jan. 21, 1873.

¹³H. H. Straight, "A 'Complete Life' the Foundation of a True Philosophy of Education," *Nebraska Teacher*, March, 1873, pp. 62-66.

¹⁴Herbert Croly, *Willard Straight*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1924, p. 4.

Straight was enrolled in the Penikese school as a "teacher in the Normal School, Warrensburg, Missouri,"¹⁵ but his fellow students usually refer to him as the "former president of Peru Normal." This title gave him some initial prestige among the students, and the high calibre of Straight's work reflected credit upon the Nebraska institution and helped to establish a favorable reputation for it.

The educational program at Penikese included field work, laboratory work, and lectures. Agassiz himself often delivered two lectures in a single day. His insistence on meticulous detail in all scientific work and his dictum "Study nature, not books" were clearly impressed upon the student naturalists. Fragments of his lectures still available reveal how sincerely he practiced his own principles. Among them one quotation appears especially applicable to the later work of Henry Straight:

You will find the same elements of instruction all about you wherever you may be teaching. You can take your classes out and give them the same lessons, and lead them up to the same subjects you are yourselves studying here. And this mode of teaching children is so natural, so suggestive, so true. That is the charm of teaching from Nature herself. No one can warp her to suit his views. She brings us back to absolute truth as often as we wander.¹⁶

After the close of the summer term in 1873 both Henry Straight and his wife returned to Warrensburg to teach in the normal school. During the two years following, Henry Straight (with the encouragement of President James Johonnot of the Central Missouri Normal) attempted to put into practice the methods of scientific study learned from Agassiz and to combine them with the procedures of classroom teaching and teacher education which he had himself developed at Peru. Much of his effort was directed toward the development of scientific study in the elementary grades—a study that was to develop into the later "Nature Study Movement." Straight converted the basement rooms

¹⁵*Organization and Progress of the Anderson School of Natural History at Penikese Island*, Report of the Trustees for 1873, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1874.

¹⁶Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, *Louis Agassiz, His Life and Correspondence*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1885, II, 775.

of the Warrensburg Normal building into a series of laboratories and continued experimentation on the methods of teaching students of science in large groups by the use of laboratory techniques.¹⁷

The methods used followed the basic formulas of "object teaching." These were described in the *Catalog* of the Normal School as quoted by *Popular Science Monthly*:

In each science a strictly objective presentation is first made by which the pupil observes the objects and facts upon which the science is founded and is led to make general classifications. Further along in the course, each science is treated again upon a higher plane, leading to more minute investigations and to broader generalizations; and in several instances the subject recurs three times before it is finally dismissed.¹⁸

Professor and Mrs. Straight resigned their positions at Central Missouri Normal School in the spring of 1875 in sympathy with President Johonnot who had been dismissed. During the following year Henry Straight was enrolled for graduate work at Cornell University and was awarded the Master of Arts degree by Oberlin College. Mrs. Emma Dickerman Straight joined the staff of Oswego Normal School. She was thus able to bring her husband's scientific collection to the attention of the school authorities with the intimation that it could be purchased. The collection appears to have been a private one developed by Straight through scientific expeditions and while teaching at Peru and afterwards. The Committee on Library and Apparatus of the Oswego Normal reported:

The Committee would respectfully recommend the purchase of Professor Henry H. Straight's collection of bird skins, reptiles, fishes, and cabinet of minerals, shells, and geological specimens, at a cost of \$500.00. The school is very much in need of specimens of this character for illustration, especially in the department of Zoology; and this will meet, to a great extent, the

¹⁷Some writers state that these experiments were carried out by Straight in his work at Peru, but Warrensburg appears to be a more logical place. Peru Normal Hall, known affectionately for many years as "Old Main" was not completed until about the time Straight left Peru in 1873, and the space for Straight's basement laboratories does not seem to have been available in the older buildings at Peru.

¹⁸*Popular Science Monthly*, V (Sept., 1874), 636.

want that has so long been felt in this department of instruction.¹⁹

Henry Straight was himself employed to teach at Oswego in the fall of 1876.²⁰ He remained there until 1883. During most of this period he taught courses in natural science, and in 1880 he was also named director of the practice school. He was relieved of the practice school assignment in 1882 when he was appointed chairman of the Department of History and Philosophy of Education.

The years at Oswego were productive ones for Henry Straight. The school was constructing a new normal school building, and Straight planned the science laboratories which were acclaimed as the finest to be found in any normal school. In these laboratories Straight conducted his courses in science, sometimes enrolling as many as ninety-five students in one class. The scientific training which Straight had received placed him in a position to develop the Pestalozzian ideas of "object teaching" with greater naturalness and effectiveness than many other experimenters with these methods had been able to do. Straight took many of his classes beyond the schoolroom examination of specimens as he had done at Peru and carried them into field work. Laurence Palmer describes these methods:

Straight took his students at Oswego from the study of unrelated and possibly insignificant objects such as had been carried on by his predecessors. Instead his students studied woods, swamps, and lake shores through frequent and extended field trips. This method undoubtedly influenced the philosophy later developed at Cornell.²¹

At Oswego Straight also began to develop new concepts of industrial education which he derived both from student projects in building equipment for the science laboratories and from deliberate experiment. These experiments were designed to explore the possibilities of coordinating a whole educational program around a core of science projects. Conclusions from these experiments were

¹⁹Board of Trustees of Oswego Normal and Training School, *Minutes*, January 22, 1876.

²⁰*Ibid.*, June 24, 1876.

²¹E. Laurence Palmer, "The Cornell Nature Study Philosophy," *Cornell Rural School Leaflet*, XXXVIII, No. 1 (September, 1944).

expressed in an address delivered at the annual meeting of the New York State Teachers Association in 1882 and in two pamphlets published subsequently.²² In Straight's opinion, education should (1) develop the creative abilities of the child, (2) acquaint him with a wise selection from the accumulated knowledge of the world, (3) develop his physical, intellectual, and artistic powers in keeping with an industrial age, and (4) develop a "conscience" or ethical concept that would insure the proper use of all other educational products and of the child's powers thus developed.

All this could most effectively be done, in his opinion, if the child were to engage in integrated activities involving all of the educational aims. What later educators spoke of as "correlation of subjects" (arranging daily lessons in reading, art, spelling, and other subjects around the same theme) was certainly included, and this in itself was unfamiliar ground for the teachers of the early 1880's. But Straight was apparently more concerned about planning a single school activity within which formal recitations in reading or arithmetic need not be held. Like many twentieth century educators he felt that the learning experience should be the project itself and formal class recitations should be held only as necessary while the project was being developed. Straight's own explanation states:

I do not believe in multiplying subjects in our school curriculum. I believe most thoroughly in reducing them. Even among the old Greeks the time came when complaint was made that the children were pestered with a multitude of subjects, all thought necessary to a proper education and accordingly all imperfectly acquired... The multiplication of subjects of study in the schools of ancient Greece was accomplished by a decline in mental vigor and spontaneity. The only hope for our future lies in a wise choice of subjects for our schools, in a wise conservation and expenditure of the energies of our children. This multiplication of subjects, it seems to us, has grown out of a lack of proper appreciation of the essentials of the great departments of knowledge and their proper relations... Closely connected lines of study have been isolated. Great departments of

²²H. H. Straight, *Some Practical Aspects of Industrial Education*, (Syracuse, New York: C. W. Bardeen, 1882); *The Aim of Industrial Education in the Public Schools and Its Proper Relation to the Regular Studies*, (Boston: Ginn, Heath, and Company, 1883).

thought have been cut up into petty fields and then each little quarter lot so covered by rubbish that teacher and pupil alike have been starved and enslaved when they ought to have been made vigorous and free through a knowledge of the truth.²³

Straight resigned his position in the summer of 1883 in order to accept a position as vice-principal of the Cook County Normal School at Chicago. This offer was made by Col. Francis W. Parker, then assuming the principalship at the Chicago institution, whom Straight had met while both he and Parker had been teaching at the Martha's Vineyard Summer Institute. At Oswego Straight had apparently found it necessary to urge his colleagues toward more natural teaching methods in keeping with the way a child learns and to convince them of the importance of relating the school experiences of children to the contemporary culture, then moving rapidly in the direction of industrialization and technological development. At Chicago (as previously at Warrensburg) he had the advantage of working with an administrator as enthusiastic about the possibilities of improved ways of teaching as he was himself. Colonel Parker gave him freedom and encouragement to develop his maturing ideas.

At Chicago Straight was able to design and accumulate additional teaching materials not previously used for instructional purposes. He was also developing notes for a projected book on psychology which he was unable to finish. One writer commented on the wide scope of his activities at Chicago:

He occupied himself in the planning and making of a desk which would render it possible for each primary child to have collections of minerals, plants, etc., trays for sand and clay modeling, as well as a place for tools and a properly constructed work bench. He also was busy in writing stories from Indian legends and folk lore designed to form the groundwork for historical investigation, and in working out details of instruction in natural science, geometry, etc. for lowest grades of schools to follow closely upon the "gifts" of the kindergarten and to form the basis for material for reading lessons.²⁴

²³H. H. Straight, *Some Practical Aspects of Industrial Education*, p. 5.

²⁴Oswego State Normal and Training School, *Historical Sketches Relating to the First Quarter Century*, p. 188.

Henry Straight's health declined rapidly during 1885—there is some suggestion that his acceptance of the position in Chicago was influenced by the hope that his somewhat delicate health would improve. When the illness was diagnosed as tuberculosis, his physician advised him to seek a warmer climate and he spent the winter in Florida without improvement. Mrs. Straight assumed his class work. When he was unable to resume his work on his return, Mrs. Straight was given a regular appointment for the year 1886-1887, and Henry Straight went first to San Diego and later to Pasadena, California. There he died, November 17, 1886.

The success of Straight's career does not lie either in his publications or even in the large number of students whom he influenced. Rather the significant fact is that his influence was greatest upon other persons who themselves became educational leaders. When Henry Straight died, the position of science in the school curriculum had been made more secure, and teachers like Francis W. Parker and Liberty H. Bailey were ready to expand his ideas into the Nature Study movement.

In a period when the combination of scientist and teacher was unusual, Henry Straight left a continuing imprint upon teaching method, the content of the school curriculum, and the nature of teacher education. The normal schools at Peru, Warrensburg, Oswego, and Chicago all felt the impact of his perceptions, and his influence was a constructive force in each of them. Similarly, the work which Straight began at Peru on the content of science courses and the methods of science teaching was matured and enriched by his efforts in each of the institutions where he later taught. Today, two generations after his death, his contributions are less well-known than during his lifetime, but his ideas are still echoed by thoughtful people who try to improve the processes of education.